

Killers in the Void

by CDS

Category: StarTrek: Deep Space Nine

Genre: Adventure

Language: English

Status: In-Progress

Published: 2000-06-18 09:00:00

Updated: 2000-06-18 09:00:00

Packaged: 2016-04-27 20:36:12

Rating: T

Chapters: 1

Words: 8,195

Publisher: www.fanfiction.net

Summary: Sisko must take the Defiant against a prototype Dominion battleship equipped with stealth technology.

Killers in the Void

> <meta name="Generator"> DISCLAIMER: Star Trek and its various characters, ships, etc. are the property of Paramount pictures and not me. They're not mine, and I'm not making any money off them with this story. I just watch their shows, see their movies, buy their stuff, put their kids through college, pay for their boats, etc.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: This story takes place shortly after the events of "Shadows and Symbols."

> <p>

* * *

> <div class="center">Killers in the Void

Even with the ship's lighting completely cut, the plasma streamers and super-heated gasses which roiled across the viewscreen washed the bridge with a glow so vivid that the crew sometimes had to squint to make out their panels' displays.

The next set of charges went off, sounding like distant, rolling thunder--the sort that on Earth would herald the onset of a summer storm, though no one on the Defiant was thinking of home right now. Sisko was certain of that.

"Not even a tremor," O'Brien remarked without taking his eyes off his console. "They're digging in the wrong spot again."

"Let's not bet our lives on that, Chief," Sisko said impassively, then turned his command chair to face the small science station where Dax seemed to be burrowing into the displays and panels. "Any luck

plotting their trajectories, old man?"

The Trill took a breath and looked over her shoulder. The new face and personality of Dax still jarred Sisko somewhat in his unguarded moments, and this was one of those moments. Instead of the aquiline features of Jadzia, as curved and flowing as blown glass, he looked at an elfin face, framed by black hair that perspiration had plastered to her forehead. A face he still didn't fully know.

"Trying, sir. They leave a wake through all this plasma, but analyzing that wake is problematic due to the plasma itself. It interferes with passive sensor readings."

Sisko turned back to the kaleidoscopic viewscreen. "Extrapolate a trajectory as best you can. Then coordinate with tactical. Give me a list of the most likely positions of that ship."

"Yes sir."

Then the second series of charges went off. Closer this time. The Defiant shuddered like a skyscraper in an earthquake, rattling tricorders and padds and anything else that wasn't secured. Nothing major had come loose, though. Not yet.

"Those blasts are stirring up plasma streamers," O'Brien called out over the boom of the proximity charges.

"We should not be hiding like this," Worf rumbled from his place at tactical. "Face them on an even field of battle."

"We're dead if we do," Sisko replied, then bared his teeth as the viewer's display of plasma streamers, powerful enough to slice through ablative armored tritanium, lashing out like serpents tongues at his de-cloaked, unshielded ship.

It had begun in the safety of his office, at his desk with the familiar diagnostic displays and the familiar baseball. The USS Midway was docked at upper pylon three for some minor repairs, while three of her fleet ships--gleaming, new Norway-class destroyers made slow, steady passes around the orbit of station. Watching the impassive, arrowhead-shaped starships, Sisko thought they looked like guard dogs patrolling the perimeter of compound.

Across his familiar desk was Captain Derrick Larwin, sitting at the edge of his chair, tapping three padds against his fingertips. Sisko didn't know Larwin well--he'd heard the man had been one of the few survivors of the costly assault on Ma'Reev shipyards, and was currently securing sector 119 against Dominion activity---but beyond that, nothing. Taking the man in, Sisko put his age at thirty-eight or so, with the haunted thousand-yard stare of a fifty-year old. He wouldn't waste time, Sisko guessed, but what he was here for wouldn't be pleasant either.

Larwin got right into it. He talked about the ship.

"Big bastard, one of their battleships. Modified. More deadly."

"Modified how?"

Larwin passed over the first padd--an intricate collection of reports and downloaded sensor logs. "She's got some kind of ECM system that totally demolishes active sensors. She gets within, we think, five-hundred thousand kilometers and everything goes to hell. Passive sensors may be able to tell you something's out there, but you're not going to be able to get a fix on her location. Nothing to target, nothing to shoot."

Sisko inhaled through his nose. Stealth technology. The Dominion had enough of an edge in this war already, and this was the sort of thing that could tip the scales irrevocably. "What about firing blind?"

Larwin shook his head. "Can't get close enough to lay down a decent spread. The closer you get, the worse the interference is. And aligning yourself for a shot is damned difficult when you're not even sure where your target is. This thing has taken out four of my ships so far and damaged another two all within this portion of the Autrician system." He punched up the location on a padd. Sisko saw a dominant inhabitable planet loosely orbited by two energy-producing moons and a cluster of unlivable outer planets that bore Starfleet signage. Defense perimeters, he guessed, or processing depots. The Autrician system was too close to the front lines to have any civilians left there.

"Only this section?" Sisko asked.

"So far," Larwin answered. "But it's a damn big system--about twenty times the size of the Sol system--and mostly filled with nothing. She just might be hanging out where the action is. Area's been nicknamed the Bungo Straits--don't ask--and unfortunately it's important enough that we can't avoid it or reroute fleet traffic. There're ships passing through every day, either assisting with the production facilities on Autrician Two, Three, and Five, or continuing the last of the planetary evacuation from Prime. Either way, there's been plenty of meat for this beast. And she's fed well. Here are the incident reports from the survivors." He passed along another padd.

"Have you discussed this with Starfleet?" Sisko asked, accepting the second padd.

"Oh yes. I had a most enlightening virtual meeting with members of Starfleet Intelligence and--you'll love this--the Tal'Shiar."

"The Tal'Shiar? The Romulans are worried about this?"

"So far, they've got a tactical advantage with their Warbirds--the Dominion still hasn't produced anything that can match them pound-for-pound for sheer meanness. This concerns them greatly.

"The meeting didn't determine a whole hell of a lot, but you're welcome to our theories and suppositions." And along came the third padd.

"No one else has reported anything like this, so we're guessing it's

a prototype. The Dominion has never produced a cloaking device, and that's to their disadvantage. Despite having access to them first with the ill-fated assault on the Dominion homeworld, then with their non-aggression treaty with the Romulans, they've just never figured it out."

"I'd wondered about that," Sisko murmured.

"Our best guess is that innovation isn't their strong point. They've got two classes of ships and only two. When they were first engaged by some of your Runabouts and the USS Odyssey, our weapons couldn't penetrate their shields, but theirs could slice through ours like a knife through hot butter. When they came at DS9 on the eve of the war, they no longer had that advantage. The odds were evened--thanks primarily to you and your crew."

Sisko nodded, acknowledging the compliment.

"But they still haven't compensated. Almost two years later and they're still at that disadvantage."

"They may be getting desperate," Sisko thought aloud. "All this time we'd been thinking that our resources were wearing thin, but they can't adapt. And that may be a bigger liability."

"That's about what we came up with. They're a totalitarian state and they're homogenous. They clone. There's not even a lot of evidence to support the speculation that they acquire new tech from the races they sign non-aggression treaties with. But this ship marks an adaptation, and a deadly one. Starfleet offered me a fleet of Excelsiors to take this thing out. I declined their offer."

"You want the Defiant," Sisko completed the thought.

"With your cloak, you can meet them on relatively even ground. You've got about as much firepower as that fleet of Excelsiors, and your ship's damn near indestructable. Plug it with a quantum torpedo and it just giggles. And there's another reason.

"If this ship is a prototype in the testing phase, then appearance is critical. She's taken out some of our own already, but they weren't looking for her. If she's hunted and decimates some or all of the hunters, you can bet we'll be seeing this technology on every fighter and battleship they produce."

"But if only one ship can destroy it," Sisko concluded coldly, "then they may abandon the project altogether."

"It's not much, but it's the best hope we've got," Larwin said without apology.

Sisko looked at the padds laid out before him like a hand of Tarot cards spelling out his destiny, a destiny entwined with the Dominion. "We've beat them at their own game before," he said slowly. "We can do it again."

Twelve hours later they were in combat.

> <p>

"The Derrenger has been destroyed, sir!" Worf called out over the din of battle. Had he not been so intent on his controls, he'd've realized that his observation was useless. The small, quickly-assembled Excelsior-variant whose distress call had beckoned them here had exploded graphically on the middle of the screen in a red-orange smear that sent Jem'Hadar fighters skittering away to safety like insects from under a rock.

"Take evasive action," Sisko ordered, characteristically dispassionate. "Target the closest fighter and pursue."

"Aye sir," Ensign Krane said from the helm, and the Defiant lurched as the inertial dampeners once again failed to keep up with the overpowered impulse engines. The screen shifted at a dizzying pace and came to center on the aft end of a Jem'Hadar fighter. Worf was handling the controls and even before the Jem'Hadar had time to fire their aft batteries, the Defiant had opened up with a salvo of photon torpedoes. The Jem'Hadar spun with the hit, allowing Worf to finish it off with a sustained pulse-phaser burst.

But the Derrenger was the only ship Larwin would feed to the beast, and the Defiant was left to take on the two remaining Jem'Hadar fighters. They put up a decent fight, but even so, Sisko knew they were stalling. The Defiant could outrun, out maneuver, and out gun them. Their tactics ensured their limited survival, but not victory. Had this been a standard engagement, the Defiant would have been on the defensive. She'd be fending off suicide runs from the fighters.

But they were buying for time, and if that was their game, then Sisko would play.

The hunting and shooting lasted only about fifteen minutes when the main viewer suddenly lost cohesion, as if hit with a sudden, electro-magnetic pulse.

"What was that?" Sisko asked.

"Unknown, sir," Dax replied. Could have been a glitch, or some residual radiation from the Jem'Hadar weaponry..."

"Or it could have been exactly what we're looking for. Mr. Worf, do you have anything on sensors?"

"Only the fighters, sir."

Then the deck fell from beneath them.

"Torpedo impact! Ventral fore shields down to seventy-nine percent!" Worf called out across the bridge. The ship shuddered again, then shook, blowing sparks and flames from the rear consoles.

"Talk to me, Mr. Worf!" Sisko snapped over the chorus of alarms and emergency crews putting out fires.

"Sensors...read nothing," Worf answered, a snarl behind the last words.

Sisko swivelled his chair to face Tactical. "Nothing?" he demanded.

"What about the Jem'Hadar fighters?"

"They are...indistinct, sir." Worf said almost sheepishly. "We cannot get a fix on their position."

Defiant shook again.

"Phased polaron hit," Dax announced, excitedly, her fair complexion flushed crimson. "I'm triangulating angle and reversing trajectory. Sending to Tactical..."

"Coordinates received," Worf concurred.

"Extrapolate location and fire a photorp spread," Sisko ordered.

The ship rocked again.

"Location extrapolated, sir. Torpedoes loaded in tubes one and two."

Sisko gripped his armrests. "Fire."

The viewscreen showed only a fraction of the net of ten torpedoes which, Sisko could see from the display on his left armrest, fanned in a 45-degree arc ahead of them. They spun like rogue comets into the distance, then exploded into a brushstroke of incandescence as matter warred with antimatter.

Worf slapped his console, "Jem'Hadar fighter bearing zero-one-three mark five-four-eight. Firing phasers..."

Sisko felt his stomach twist as the _Defiant_ rolled like an atmospheric fighter and lined up with the insectoid Jem'Hadar ship. Onscreen it was little more than a purplish blip. Then the quad turbophasers flared and erased it.

"Target destroyed," Ensign Krane reported as she righted the ship's course.

"Any sign of the battleship?"

"Negative, sir, sensors--"

Then the deck dropped from beneath them again and for the briefest instant Sisko thought that this was the end. The noise was overwhelming: the hull creaking in protest, the shields carrying the sound of impacts and explosions, the crackle and hiss of exploding and burning systems.

"Report!"

"Multiple torpedo hits!" Dax called over the din. "Forward shields have collapsed. Backups online in twenty seconds!"

"We've got breeches on deck two sections eight and ten," O'Brien said as he struggled out of his seat past a tangle of cables spilled from a ruined console. "I'll be in engineering."

"Torpedo coming in!" Worf shouted. "Impact: Seven seconds!"

"Shields online in fifteen..."

"Course?" Sisko demanded.

"Bearing one-niner-six..."

"Shields online in twelve..."

"Impact: four seconds."

Sisko lunged forward, out his chair, leaning over Krane. "Bring us to a bearing of zero-five-seven, now!"

Defiant strained against her wounds, the artificial gravity whining as it struggled to keep up with the maneuver, failed, pulled everyone's stomachs into their intestines.

"Impact in two...one..."

The ship swung with the impact as the bridge went black but for the illumination from the surviving consoles. Sisko fell into his chair as he heard his crew cry out against training and instincts, as they were hurled toward the edges of the circular bridge like the contents of a centrifuge as the ship spun like a flat stone skipped over a placid pond.

But only for a moment. Then the station-keeping thrusters kicked in and painfully righted the small ship. A few seconds later the lights came up, blood red. Sisko loosened his grip on the armrests and sized up the situation. His crew was scrambling to take their stations, while the bridge medic darted from one to another, madly waving the diagnostic sensor of his medical tricorder. He saw a laceration on Ezri's brow so fresh it had barely begun to bleed.

"I don't bloody believe it," O'Brien huffed from where he'd tumbled on his way to the turbolift. "This is a well built ship."

"Why are we alive?" Krane asked as she slid into her chair

O'Brien talked while he hurried over to his console. "The structural design of her warp nacelles was designed to be able to take a frontal torpedo impact and channel the energy through the barrel of the nacelle. It completely guts one warp engine, but our structural integrity's undamaged."

"Not for long," Sisko said ruefully. "We've got to be bleeding plasma, and as long as we are, our cloak is worthless. We need to find cover while we make repairs."

"The Banion Belt," Dax said with certainty, oblivious, it seemed to Sisko, to the rivulet of blood that now creased her soot-smudged cheek.

"I was thinking the same thing," Sisko concurred, then noticed that Bashir was about to ask the question. "It's a belt of highly-charged EM activity similar to the Badlands, but on a much smaller scale. It was created when Autrician Prime's two moons were converted to energy sources."

"That much energy will blind their sensors," O'Brien concurred as he bent over his station. "Of course the moment we make a move they'll be able to track us by our wake. Uh, sir, we've completely lost the starboard nacelle." He levelled his gaze at Sisko. "We're not going to be able to go to warp."

Sisko nodded and verbalized what the Chief wouldn't. "We'll have to fight our way out of this one. Begin repairs Chief."

"Aye sir."

Sisko faced forward. "The Banion Belt, Ensign Krane. Full impulse." He added beneath his breath, "Before that ship comes back for us."

Trailing a thick, glittering film of plasma, the battered, blackened USS Defiant plunged into the rolling, viscous soup of irradiated particles, and highly-charged plasma, her crew knowing full well that they were being followed by unseeable hunters.
> <p>

They'd been in the belt for about three hours, making repairs when the first fighters came for them. They screamed through the poison of the Banion Belt with all the concern of speedboats in the open ocean. Their active sensors were wide open and further polluting the stretch of space with even more energy. They had, of course, received reports from the Experimental Battlecruiser which reported the Federation ship badly damaged, and their various Vorta correctly guessed that most systems on the ship would be shut down while they effected repairs. So they moved as unit into the Banion belt, using their speed and their enemy's handicap. It took them only about an hour to pinpoint the Defiant's position.

> <div class="center">*****<div> At the precise moment that the lead fighter's sensors divined the disk-like ship from the rest of the EM soup, Sisko was standing in the cluttered, ravaged Engine Room trying hard not to either sink into a hopeless depression or strangle O'Brien.

"At least half of the ODN lines have been burned out," O'Brien continued. His uniform was streaked with soot and stained with various chemical solvents and seals. All around them, similarly gold-uniformed engineering crews were scrambling around the bay, popping in and out of jeffries tubes and wriggling into access hatches and conduits. It felt, Sisko thought uncomfortably, like being in the center of an anthill. "Now, we can compensate using secondary systems and rerouting through non-essential systems, but that's going to mean a slower response time to commands. Maybe a second or two."

"Long enough in combat," Sisko said darkly.

"Yes sir. But it's the EPS conduits that I'm most concerned about. We're relying on the secondaries for at least sixty percent of all our systems. If these get knocked out then--"

"--Then we lose power until you can patch the system," Sisko replied.

"Yes sir."

"And this on top of the fact we've lost a quarter of our shield nodes, section twelve is uninhabitable and we've got multiple hull breeches that severely inhibit our ability to accelerate and maneuver?"

"With the Structural Integrity Field at only seventy percent, ah...yes sir."

"Any good news, Chief?"

O'Brien looked around at his busy repair crews. "Well, we are in better shape than any ship that's previously tangled with this monster."

Sisko gave him a chilly smile. "Your optimism lifts my heart."

Then the red alert sounded.

> <p>

They were unafraid of the wounded Federation starship currently trying to stitch itself back together again, and so they approached at flank speed in a classic tripod position with a lead ship that would commence the attack, and the remaining two ships maintaining positions aft and to the sides and cruising at a slightly slower speed. After the initial slashing attack, as the lead ship was peeling off and doubling back, the rear two ships would lay down heavier fire at the wounded prey being very careful to target the systems already hit by their comrade.

But they were careless. Their attention was fixed on the Federation starship they were intent on destroying, and the temporarily forgot the volatile nature of this place. Their proximity alarms and distortion detectors were active and so they weren't paying attention to roiling gasses around them.

The plasma streamer formed in a little under thirty seconds and lashed out over a distance of three thousand kilometers just as the triangle of glowing, purple ships plowed its way. The crew of the foremost ship barely registered what was happening before the superheated semi-solid matter sliced through shields and hull and carved the ship open like a carcass.

The chase ships broke formation to avoid the streamer, but by that time _Defiant's_ sensors had them.

> <p>

"Report!" Sisko shouted as he leapt into his command chair.

"Jem'Hadar fighters bearing one-three-seven by six-two-two," Worf reported.

"One of them hit a plasma streamer and exploded," Dax explained.

"Otherwise we wouldn't have even seen them until..."

"I get it, Old Man. Combat status?"

"Weapons online. Targeting sensors coming up. Shields at forty-three percent."

"Bleed off more power, Mr. Worf. Ensign Krane, bring us to a heading of one-three-seven. One-third impulse."

Sisko felt the adrenaline hum in his ears as the ships engines kicked in and brought her around with an unexpected, excruciating slowness. The viewer abruptly switched vistas, responding to the tactical data, and showed them the two Jem'Hadar fighters screaming toward them like hunting birds of prey.

"Lock phasers on lead ship. Quantum torpedoes on the chase ship."

"Weapons locked," Worf affirmed.

They sped toward each other, auguring great tunnels out of the gaseous surroundings.

"Jem'Hadar now at fifty thousand kilometers," Dax reported.

"Targeting sensors not yet online."

"Chief?" Sisko snapped into the comm system on his chair, but all he got was the squeal of the defunct internal communications system.

"Enemy now at twenty thousand kilometers. Weapons range in twelve seconds."

Sisko felt his skin pulled tight, felt heat prickle at the back of his neck. The warrior was hobbled by his means of battle. The archer with the broken bow. The cavalry officer's horse had a broken leg."

"Nine seconds."

"Sensors still offline," Worf blurted, sounding as if he was on the verge of jumping out of his seat and taking on the Jem'Hadar fighters with his bare hands.

"Six seconds."

"Prepare to fire blind, Mr. Worf," Sisko ordered. "Full phasers."

"Aye sir!" The prospect of firing--even blindly--seemed enough to pacify Worf.

"Firing range...now!"

"Open fire, Mr. Worf!"

Defiant shuddered slightly around them as her mighty turbophasers

spat bolts of energy across space at an unseen target. Three seconds later, the return fire hit with a vengeance.

The ship bucked, her inertial dampeners screaming as they tried to compensate for both the acceleration as well as the negative energy of the weapons' impact. Sisko ignored it, ignored the panels exploding behind him and the sounds of emergency crews spraying fire-retardants. His attention was focused like a laser at the screen and the Jem'Hadar fighters it showed.

"Targeting sensors online! Firing all weapons!" Worf shouted. Then the ship bucked again. Bulkheads fell and spilled ODN lines and EPS conduits. Onscreen, Sisko saw the orange phasers lash out again, and this time shatter one of the fighters into a sheet of flame.

"Where are my torpedoes?"

"Forward delivery system offline," Worf reported. "Firing phasers."

Sisko saw the second Jem'Hadar ship soak up the shots. She lost pieces and bled a glittering stream of gasses.

"Enemy now aft of us."

"Fire!"

"Phasers offline. Firing aft tubes."

The viewer showed the damaged fighter attempting to angle around for another strafing run when the blood-red spheres of the photorps tumbled from the bottom of the screen and slammed its port nacelle. First the nacelle went, then the explosions spread until the ship was nothing more than dust.

Sisko slowly swivelled his chair around to face Worf. "Good shooting."

"Thank you, sir. But we are not exactly in fighting form, sir."

"No," Sisko growled. "But we're going to have to get in fighting form in the next few hours."

"Sir?"

"The explosions," Dax explained. "They'll know where we are now."

> <p>

The damage control teams were servicing the bridge, and Sisko had ordered all non-essential personnel out, so Ezri had left with her padds full of information about the new cloaking system. She'd intended to go to the mess hall, replicate a _raktojino_, and pore over them in the relative luxury of a wide, table. Unfortunately, that section of deck two was off-limits due to a series of severed EPS conduits which had contaminated the area. Repair crews were still decontaminating the area.

So she took a serpentine route to the med/science labs. Julian had been on a field assignment accompanying the landing infantry at Chin'Toka when they'd left for this mission, and his sickbay was currently being staffed by a few of his medics who were, for the most part, treating the battle injuries and had no need for the research equipment.

She uploaded the information and began taking it apart piece by piece. Exercising the scientist in her was tricky. She was aggravated by hunches, suspicions, and ideas that were forever at the tip of her brain. But since she was not Jadzia Dax, they usually would not coalesce into something tangible, simply disappear into the void between the echoes of what she was and the person she'd become.

The frequency patterns taken from the sensor logs of their encounter with the Stealth Ship were on her monitor, beside those taken from the jettisoned buoys of other ships that hadn't survived their encounters.

There's something there, all right, she thought. _I just wish I could _see_ it!_

Ezri chewed her lip, then went back to it.
> <p>

One deck above her on the opposite end of the ship, Benjamin Sisko sat alone in his Ready Room. Like Ezri, he too was looking over a landscape of padds. And Like Ezri, his also contained the downloaded information about the battles with the new Dominion battleship.

His firepower was halved, his ship's abilities at three-fourths its capacity. He had to figure out how to kill the things at a disadvantage. He ignored the new stealth technology--he trusted that Dax would figure out a way to counter it--so he assumed that he'd be facing the thing in a stand-up fight.

But Dominion battleships were damned tough adversaries in any conditions for any captain. As close as Allies Intelligence had been able to determine, those ships were flat-out warships with no scientific, leisure, or medical facilities. This left plenty of empty space to punch holes in uselessly, plenty of power for numerous polaron turrets and torpedo tubes. Under optimal circumstances, going head-to-head against one of those monsters would be a difficult task for the _Defiant_, and these were far from ideal circumstances.

Sisko was, beneath it all, an engineer. A shipwrite. Accordingly, he ignored the tactical ramblings of the analysts at Intelligence, and concentrated on the schematics and technical information the Allies had accumulated on the ships. He viewed them as he would a set of blueprints that had come across his desk for review at Utopia Planetia. _Don't get caught up in details,_ he reminded himself, _bottom line it: what, on this thing, could get people killed?_ That had been his mantra when he was there, reviewing production schematics, trying to raise Jake, mourning his wife and, in his spare time, designing the _Defiant_.

Shield output was low--a little less than half of that of a Sovereign or Galaxy-class cruiser, and they weren't regenerative. This wasn't a surprise. The Dominion seemed to prize armor, structural soundness, and structural integrity fields over energy-shielding. That's how the one had managed to crash on a planet and still be revived and repaired. It was typical Dominion thinking: conserve power to be used for weapons systems, crew expendable. They could always clone more soldiers and build more ships.

Knocking down the shields would be easy, but that left a lot of layers of armor plating, and no forward torpedoes to blow through them. The phasers would take too long, and unless the Defiant was completely stationary, its fire would be distributed, unable to concentrate on a specific target area.

Sisko let his gaze burn into the schematics. There was a weakness here somewhere, he knew. There always was.

> <p>

"Oh, there you are, Lieutenant," O'Brien said from the doorway to the lab. "My crew's done with the bridge, so you can go back up any time."

Ezri didn't take her eyes off the monitor. "Thanks, Chief," she said past a fingernail that was clenched between her teeth.

"What's that?" he asked, coming up behind her. It was so typical of him, she thought. Anything technical drew to it like an insect to a light source. O'Brien was one of the few people she knew who had a true vocation, as real to him as religion was to the faithful.

"I'm trying to make sense of these sensor readings of the Dominion's cloaking field or whatever it is," she replied. "Something tells me that there's a pattern here, but I can't... I can't tell if it really is or if I'm just losing my mind."

"Hm." O'Brien scrolled through a couple of the readouts, exploring the various phase-shifts and frequencies. "There!" He pointed to one. "You're definitely not losing your mind, Lieutenant. I've seen that before."

"What is it?" Ezri asked.

"A low-band subspace tachyon emission."

"Oh," she replied, the meaning of this lost on her. "Where have you seen it before?"

"On malfunctioning sensor arrays."

> <p>

A half hour later, Sisko's senior staff was assembled in his Ready Room. He'd cleared away his padds to make room for whatever they wanted to bring with them and to keep from tempting them to ask awkward questions about how they were going to defeat that ship.

"Damage?" Sisko asked.

"We've repaired everything that can be repaired," O'Brien explained. "We're still at about seventy-nine percent power. Aft phasers online, but the forward torpedo magazines are destroyed. They'll have to be loaded in the tubes manually."

"Which takes time," Sisko said bitterly. "Which can mean lives in combat." He delivered the last line with the same edge he used to take the starch out of ensigns and new postings at DS9. It was the tone that instructed them not to screw with him, not to doubt him, not to second-guess him, because he'd seen more, faced more, and lived more than they ever would.

But he immediately regretted it. O'Brien looked at the table sheepishly, as if the ship's failures were his fault. Sisko pursed his lips and made a mental note to keep the frustration out of his voice for the rest of the meeting.

Rallying to her crewmate's support, Dax perked up, "We have some good news, Captain. We think we've identified the Dominion's stealth weapon."

Sisko leaned forward and rested his elbows on the table. "I'm still listening."

O'Brien stood, noticeably more at ease. Sisko was grateful for that. "Well, you see, sir, it's not exactly a cloak at all." The Engineer activated the wall monitor and uploaded the information from his padd. The monitor showed a series of frequency bandwidths. Sisko had the ugly feeling this was going to be a long lecture.

"These tachyon emissions were all recorded during run-ins between Federation ships and that battlecruiser. They're extremely low-band, high frequency transmissions. Now, occasionally we see these in engineering when the individual sensors go haywire. Usually a massive EMP scrambled the relays and the automatic default is set...well, that's really the point, but essentially this is subspace garbage. The tachyon equivalent of feedback or static. When a malfunctioning sensor produces this it's usually pretty low-frequency, so we can detect it and make repairs, however if a sensor were set for maximum output and generating this stuff at a very high frequency it would effectively blind all separate sensor apparatuses within range."

"A smoke screen," Sisko breathed, feeling the hairs on the back of his neck rise. Dammit all they had them!

"Essentially," O'Brien concurred. "But a more apt analogy would be using a very loud noise to drown out the sound of your footsteps."

"The problem," Dax said, "is in the targeting system. If their sensors are producing this stuff, then they can't see us any better than we can see them."

"They're targeting us somehow," Sisko said, feeling the adrenaline climb in him. The earlier feelings of frustration and despair were falling away in the face of a heady invincibility. "Maybe it's something here in the Bungo Straits. Some radiation that allows them

to see ships through their own blind."

"It's theoretically possible that the residue from the Banion Belt adrift in this region could be used as a homing beacon--the way intelligence organization used radioactive dust to track enemy agents during Earth's Cold War. But we can't even tune our sensors to that level of sensitivity. I doubt that the Dominion could have found a way to do it. You begin to have to rewrite the laws of astrophysics."

"Well, they've got some means of doing it--their attacks have been too precise to be shooting blindly. I want to know what it is, and I want a way to screen these tachyon emissions."

"The emissions are on a modulating frequency," O'Brien explained. "Trying to ascertain the pattern is going to be difficult. And we'll have to be in the midst of it to get enough usable information to send the main computer for extrapolation."

"Which means we will be in the middle of combat," Worf growled. "With an enemy that we cannot see, but see us perfectly."

"Not optimal conditions," Sisko concurred, "but we don't have much--"

He was cut off by the explosion that shook the ship like a box of coins and by the red alert claxons.

> <p>

The viewscreen showed a greenish blur that was the Banion Belt. After a few minutes of breathless watching, the star-shaped charges tumbled through the gasses and radiation bursts.

"Charges coming in," Worf announced somewhat rhetorically. Onscreen, they exploded in tight, white blooms, ringed with expanding shockwaves. "Exploded prematurely."

"They're shooting too shallow," Ensign Krane commented in a tight voice.

"They won't be for long," Sisko said dryly. "Ensign, bring us to a heading of mark-thirty-seven degrees. Maneuvering thrusters only."

"Aye sir."

"Chief, shut down all non-essential system. Keep our profile as low as possible." Sisko heard O'Brien keying in systems on his console, and a moment later the bridge went dark but for the intense scarlet of her red alert lights and the slight illumination of their consoles. The ship hummed around him as the thrusters eased her into position and pushed her deeper into the heart of the Banion Belt.

"All non-essential systems shut down," O'Brien reported. "We're at passive sensors only."

> <p>

"Copy that, Chief."

Even with the ship's lighting completely cut, the plasma streamers and super-heated gasses which roiled across the viewscreen washed the bridge with a glow so vivid that the crew sometimes had to squint to make out their panels' displays.

The next set of charges went off, sounding like distant, rolling thunder--the sort that on Earth would herald the onset of a summer storm, though no one on the Defiant was thinking of home right now. Sisko was certain of that.

"Not even a tremor," O'Brien remarked without taking his eyes off his console. "They're digging in the wrong spot again."

"Let's not bet our lives on that, Chief," Sisko said impassively, then turned his command chair to face the small science station where Dax seemed to be burrowing into the displays and panels. "Any luck plotting their trajectories, old man?"

"Trying, sir. They leave a wake through all this plasma, but analyzing that wake is problematic due to the plasma itself. It interferes with passive sensor readings."

Sisko turned back to the kaleidoscopic viewscreen. "Extrapolate a trajectory as best you can. Then coordinate with tactical. Give me a list of the most likely positions of that ship."

"Yes sir."

Then the second series of charges went off. Closer this time. The Defiant shuddered like a skyscraper in an earthquake, rattling tricorders and padds and anything else that wasn't secured. Nothing major had come loose, though. Not yet.

"Those blasts are stirring up plasma streamers," O'Brien called out over the boom of the proximity charges.

"We should not be hiding like this," Worf rumbled from his place at tactical. "Face them on an even field of battle."

"We're dead if we do," Sisko replied, then bared his teeth as the viewer's display of plasma streamers, powerful enough to slice through ablative armored tritanium, lashing out like serpents tongues at his de-cloaked, unshielded ship.

"Passive sensors have detected the battlecruiser's solar wake," Dax reported.

"Any hard coordinates?"

"A few combinations. I'm transferring them to tactical."

"Permission to bring weapons systems online," Worf asked excitedly.

"Denied."

"Sir--"

"We're out of range. Phasers wouldn't damage their shields and they'd have plenty of time to detect and evade our torpedoes." He added, "And it takes a bit longer than normal to reload them."

"Aye sir," Worf sighed dejectedly.

"Dominion battlecruiser seems to be slowing," Dax said.

"Are they making any attempt to move into the Belt?"

"No sir. They've just slowed to impulse."

"They don't want come in," Krane said. "Don't want to end up like that fighter that got hulled."

"A ship that size would displace enough of this gas and particles to be a nice big target," Sisko agreed. "But I don't think that's it."

"Sir?"

"Status, Dax?" He cast his glance her way. She was bent over her console, chewing her lower lip like a perplexed teenager.

"Dominion battlecruiser appears to be pivoting on her axis. Coming to stern."

Sisko felt his heart hammer. "Chief, emergency power-up! Helm, plot a course out of the Belt. Stand by to arm all weapons."

The bridge went tight with anxiety. "Power up in ten seconds," O'Brien reported.

"Course plotted."

"I'm detecting weapons fire."

"Raise shields!" Sisko felt the ice come over him. It was how he approached combat: cold and unrelenting.

"Shields at thirty-seven percent. Standing by."

"Power up in four...three..."

Space exploded around them.

Defiant rolled, then spun as the Dominion torpedoes exploded inside the Banion Belt, igniting plasma and setting the envelope of gas and dust around the ship on fire.

"Damage report!" Sisko called out over the thunder of torpedo explosions and scream of bridge alarms.

"Shields at sixty percent. Aft phaser banks are fused," Worf announced. Sisko registered his anger, but didn't let it show. The last thing they needed was to lose more weapons systems.

The ship lurched forward and the aft science station--mercifully unmanned--burned itself out in a wave of flame and polyalloy

shrapnel.

"They hit us with a polaron beam!" Dax explained.

"Helm, bring us around to one-five-niner and take evasive action," he ordered, then, to himself: "They knew where we were."

"How?" Dax asked. "The charges didn't come near us. What could have--"

Sisko brought up the sensor readings from the point just prior to the battlecruiser's turn. He selected one portion and transferred it to O'Brien's station. "Chief, what's this?"

"Huh...Radio, sir. A radio transmission. This area of space is probably swarming with them from before the war."

And then Sisko knew!

Because it was the only way the plan could work. Because Dominion technology hadn't made any great leap, simply did the logical thing and made it look like they'd developed a terrible new weapon...

"Dax, cross-reference with the rest of the sensor readings. See if there was radio traffic before or during the rest of the attacks."

"Aye captain." Explosions rumbled around them, but the ship held.

"Mr. Worf, load aft tubes."

"Aye sir."

"Confirmed sir," Dax said. "Radio signals present at the time of those attacks. But they're present almost always--"

"Not signals," Sisko said, showing his teeth. "Transmissions."

"Sir?"

"We're not alone out here. The Dominion battleship has a spotter. Someone that watches their adversary when that thing engages its tachyon field and goes blind and the radios the position of the target."

"If their sensor filters were modulated to filter out the tachyon transmissions, they'd be able to see perfectly," O'Brien mulled. "And a radio transmission wouldn't be noticed in the middle of battle. Not in this region..."

"But how is it we haven't been able to see the targeting vessel?" Worf asked. "It must be keeping a close enough distance to ensure that the radio signals reach the battleship quickly enough for the coordinates to be of use."

"It's cloaked," Sisko answered simply.

"But the Dominion doesn't have cloaking technology," Ensign Krane protested.

"They haven't _developed_ it. But that Cardassio-Romulan armada which attacked the Founder's homeworld did. And I'm willing to bet that they captured at least one of those ships intact."

"So we're looking for a _Romulan_ cloaking device," O'Brien said, as if the answer just dawned on him. "Well, that's easy."

Sisko swung to face him. "Chief?"

"Well, the energy signature of a Romulan cloaking device gives off a slight subspace pulse. Ordinarily, it's undetectable, but with all the energy of the Banion Belt it'd stand out like shadow on a white wall."

Sisko faced forward. "Do it, Chief. All hands to battle stations. We're taking this bastard down!"

Cheers went up, and the _Defiant_ swung around on a course out of the Banion Belt.

"Sensor relays reprogrammed," O'Brien reported.

"Good, Chief," Sisko was distracted. He was looking at the schematics of the battleship on his console. Their weakness would now be their blindness. He could hit them from almost any position he needed to. He pulled up the energy output and made his decision.

"Weapons armed," Worf reported. "Quantum torpedoes loaded in tubes one and two. Photorp salvo in tube three."

"That's it, then," Sisko said, edging up in his chair. "Helm, take us out of here. Flank speed."

> <p>

Defiant burst from the vicious strip of the Banion Belt like a hawk emerging from a cumulus cloud. She rolled on her axis, then cut her engines.

"Sensors just went haywire," Dax reported. "That ship's tachyon screen is up and running."

"Good. Mr. O'Brien?"

"No sign of the--wait! Vessel bearing one-seven-seven. Transferring coordinates to tactical."

"Coordinates received," Worf reported.

Sisko held up a hand. "Hold your fire. Dax can you get a fix on that radio transmission?"

"Yes sir. Direction...reception. I think I've got a tentative set of coordinated for tactical."

"This is it, people. Mr. Worf, full torpedo spread, aft tubes."

Forward phasers at the cloaked vessel."

"Aye sir," Worf said, unexpectedly quietly.

Defiant suddenly went from an unremarkable metallic disk to a fury. Phasers lashed out at empty space, while a wide curtain of photorps fanned out behind her. The cloaked ship caught hell first, the phasers shattering her outer hull and demolishing her cloak. She spun in space, fading into view for just a moment.

On the main viewer, Sisko saw it appear----a small Romulan scout craft, no bigger than an Antares-class PT boat. It's attitude was shot to hell, and that meant most other systems were too. Sisko had time enough to utter, "There she is," before the small, green ship blew herself to pieces, scattering her elements----her hull plating, chunks of her nacelles, her engines, her bridge----into acrid expanse of the Banion Belt.

"Torpedoes?" Sisko asked

"Negative impact," Dax reported. "Wait! One hit! We have coordinated."

"Transfer them. Helm, go!"

"Sensors still useless," Krane reminded them.

"So are theirs. We should be coming into visual soon." A moment later, a purplish blip appeared on the viewer.

"Magnifying..."

The blip became a ship. A monster. A massive wedge which began at a set of cruel pincers and sloped upward steeply to a high bridge and tandem turrets. It looked more like a lumbering city in space than a ship--until you noticed the weapons emplacements.

"That's a bloody evil-looking ship," O'Brien commented.

"You've got that right Chief. Helm, take us in their X-axis. Mr. Worf, standby for my command."

The viewscreen shifted suddenly as the Defiant made her attack run. The bridge went silent as the battleship seemed to shift, then face them head-on. Even from here, from this position, they could see the weapons emplacements.

It was the worst possible position to be in. And the best.

"Full speed ahead," Sisko ordered.

The battleship suddenly lit up with fire. Polaron beams lanced out like blades, while torpedoes salvos streaked blue against the void. Sisko tried to count the torpedo tubes, but couldn't. He gave up counting the beams after twenty.

Explosions, tendrils of flame and phased energy lashed out aimlessly and mercilessly. Defiant shrugged it off and pressed forward.

"Coming up at...seventy-thousand kilometers," Krane noted. The ship trembled in the thrall of a shockwave.

"Sixty...fifty..."

"Mr Worf, ready on weapons!" Sisko snapped.

"Aye sir!"

Then the deck fell away. The bulkheads collapsed, exhaling fumes and smoke and steam from torn and perforated junctures.

"Direct hit. Forward shields down to thirty-two percent!" Worf cried out over the cacophony of alarms and shouts. _"Dominion ship now has a fix on us."_

More explosions rocked the ship. Sisko tuned it out, only paid attention to the readings on his panel.

"Mr. Worf...fire phasers now. Standby on torpedoes once you see those shields go down!"

"Aye sir!"

The ship trembled again. Helm exploded, blowing Krane back over her chair into a bloody heap on the wreckage-strewn deck.

"Back ups!" Sisko shouted over his shoulder.

"Got it!" came a voice. A new lieutenant--one he hadn't met yet--moved to the auxiliary helm station.

Sisko heard the phasers firing. Felt their tremor through the ship, and saw them blunted by the battleship's shields. They smeared, stained the bubble of energy, but assaulted it mercilessly. Bolt after bolt until the energy slammed bare hull and vaporized armor.

"Fire torpedoes!"

The Dominion battleship loomed large onscreen, became a wall of metallic alloys, segmented decks, viewports and blazing gun turrets, and _Defiant_ was being smashed to pieces by her.

Two blue/white streaks, leaving a photon wake. Sisko watched them, ignored everything else.

"Torpedoes running hot, straight, and normal!" Worf announced as the overhead comm system blew out in a shower of sparks.

And then they slid through the gap Worf had made in the shields, hit, and exploded.

It was the perfect spot, Sisko knew, the part of the ship that was stressed the most by the inertia created by the ship's massive impulse engines. The negative-energy impact of the quantum torpedoes ripped deeply into the battleship's hull, peeling away layers of armor and power systems, igniting flammable compounds and gasses and ammunition and finally cracking the support struts and beams like rotting wood.

Inertia did the rest. The structure was no longer stable, and she quickly split along her beam as if grasped by two unseen hands and twisted. A few moments later and her reactors blew and she began the slow process of gutting herself with fire.

By that time, the Defiant was on its way toward the Autrician Prime.

"Mr. Worf repeat SOS. Transmit our coordinates to any Federation starship. Larwin must have a few skulking about somewhere."

"Aye sir."

"Chief?"

O'Brien met his gaze.

"Let's start putting her back together again. For the next time."

They went to work in the wounded ship--little more than silent point of light in the fathomless empty that was space.

End
file.